Course Content + Course Management does not equal Class Connection

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Today it is common for universities to have entire classes and even degrees available on-line, but all too often they rely solely on course management systems like Blackboard and focus on limited techniques to deliver content and foster interaction. The Educational Technology program at Southeastern Louisiana University decided to start offering our Masters Degree through 100% online courses in spring 2011 with the understanding that students should have an experience in the program that was at least equally engaging as our on-campus courses. To that end, our ETEC 645 – Distance Education – course became the first one designed under this new mandate.

This Best Practices session will discuss ten techniques that were integrated into the course, show student reaction to them, and provide attendees with examples and lessons learned. The techniques were: a class Wiki that was edited collaboratively, video distribution via a private Flip Channel, group discussions using Voice Thread, screen sharing with Yugma, virtual meetings in Second Life, group email through a Yahoo Listserv, file sharing with Dropbox, schedule distribution through Google calendar, assignment feedback using Skype, and lecture posting in AuthorStream. One of the most interesting of these tools was Voice Thread. It is a web-based tool that costs $100/year for the professor, but is free to the students. The instructor posts an image, video, or slide that will generate discussion and then everyone can make comments that all show up, visually around the edges of the topic starter. The person commenting can easily create a video message, an audio message, a text note, or even a transcribed text note by calling in the comment if they don’t have a microphone. The students thought the format allowed for discussions that were truly a round-table chat rather than a series of written posts and also commented on the ease of use. The professors found Yugma to be especially helpful because they could quickly determine where a student was having trouble and then demonstrate the correct procedures by sharing their own screen view. The session will focus on how these techniques helped to foster a more connected classroom that felt like an on-campus class.